

## **Mondeggi as a Common - Farm without Masters**

### **3 YEAR OF POPULAR STEWARDSHIP: WHAT HAS CHANGED?**

#### **A bit of history...**

The estate of Mondeggi, of medieval origin and located at the gates of Chianti Florentine, was for centuries a villa-farm belonging to noble families like the Bardi, the Portinai and the Gherardesca. Following various extensions, overhaul and ownership changes, in the 1960s the estate was acquired by the Province of Florence. The traditional organization and the promiscuous crops were completely replaced by a corporate approach based on the model of an industrialized agricultural enterprise with both mechanized intensive farming and heavy use of conventional chemical treatments. Years of fraud management of the Mondeggi and Lappeggi farms s.r.l. (Owned by the province) led to the accumulation of more than one million euros in debt and the liquidation of the same company (2009), with its nearly two hundred hectares of land, park, cottage, vineyards, olive groves, pastures and arable crops. This resulted in a condition of abandonment and incurrence that has lasted for years and which concerned both the farm structures and the villa.

In 2011, the approval of the *Salva Italia* administrative order by the Monti government began the sale of public agricultural land (Article 66) in order to reduce the Italian public debt. This measure has complicated the situation and deprived the Italian people of valuable public resources. In contrast to this law and in defense of the right to access to land, the "Terra Bene Comune" campaign was born, claiming participative and autonomous management of public lands by local communities, in the context of neo-rural projects, privileging project of peasant, natural, and community-based farming, within a new relationship between city and country. The initiative was launched by the national network of Genuino Clandestino: a movement that has emerged from a campaign of denunciation of the norms that outlaw the transformation of agricultural products by peasants through impossible requirements, comparable to those of the large food industries. The movement, on the contrary, aimed at promoting the spread of peasant and small-scale agriculture, constructing territorial communities and participatory guarantee systems, support free access to land and the right to a genuine, accessible, locally produced food.

In this process is central the activity of the *Terra Bene Comune Firenze* committee, which began in 2012 by distributing a thousand postcards to be sent to the governor of Tuscany Enrico Rossi, expressly requesting the commitment not to sell the land owned by regional and public property. The following year a public meeting of the committee at the Faculty of Agriculture took place, with a structured discussion on various issues such as campaign management, confrontation with administrations, disputes on which to concentrate, role of local communities in the spread of peasant agriculture, right to self-construction, search for lands on which to focus for projects related to food sovereignty and return to land. This encounter kick started a network of subjects such as the Agrarian Collective, the SolidWorks Group, some social centers, various associations, peasants and activists. During one of the following assemblies of the committee attention was given to the case of the Mondeggi farm, where one of the national meetings of the Genuino Clandestino network (November 2013) was held, focusing on TBC campaign issues, giving a tour of the place open to the public, and planting together wheat in one of the fields left uncultivated for years, followed by a public assembly at the House of the People of Grassina (one of the towns adjacent to Mondeggi).

The work of the TBC - Florence Committee has thus come together in the committee *Toward Mondeggi as a Common – Farm Without Masters*, with the aim of promoting a mobilization for the restoration of the entire Mondeggi farm through the practices of peasant agriculture. As a first step, we organized a national gathering about commons and some days of olives harvest, as an example of using commons for productive work and spread wealth. The extracted oil was redistributed during local markets and initiatives to raise awareness and engage the local community in a shared reflection on the fate of Mondeggi and in increasingly intensive activities, both on the land and in territorial assemblies, marked by meetings, cultural and recreational events to involve and bring people to live the experience of Mondeggi while warding off the dreary destiny of private speculation. Meanwhile, assembly discussions led to the drafting and approval of the Charter of Principles and Intentions, a sort of first definition of a shared project.

At the end of February 2014, the Municipal Council of Bagno a Ripoli approved a motion requesting the Province of Florence to open a phase of analysis and evaluation of alternatives to the sale. But after several episodes of confrontation with the institutions, an increasingly determined will to alienate Mondeggi emerged. Before being replaced by the Metropolitan City as the institution formally in charge of the estate, the Province's last act was to authorize the company that used to control the farm the sale of its assets. Although the sale of commons such as Mondeggi may seem like a compulsory road to resonate public debt, it is actually a short-sighted choice, betraying the task of enhancing the social function of public goods and increasingly subtracting from collective use. The Committee, therefore, decided to oppose the sale, initiating a process of re-assimilation and popular stewardship launched at the end of June 2014, during a 3-day national initiative, involving around a thousand people. The initiative was supported by appeals signed by numerous citizens, associations, movements, dozens of academic personalities, as well as authoritative lawyers active on the issue of protection and access to commons.

### **The popular stewardship of Mondeggi**

A few months later, the auction did not bear any fruit: no one bought the estate. In the meantime, within the same desert of buyers and prospects for the place, a new seed germinated on the uninhabited lands of the farm. A seed made up of the varied community that gathered around the defense of Mondeggi and intervened on its state of abandonment, intensifying the organization of events opened to the whole population to foster local awareness and sociality, take care of buildings, and develop numerous agricultural, social, and cultural projects. Since the farm's rebirth, the popular stewardship of the estate have seen a stable presence of young residents who moved in and fixed up some of the buildings in the estate, determined to give substance to the Charter of Principles and Intentions and to contribute to the conversion of abandoned public goods into common self-managed by and accessible to the community.

Great effort is constantly directed at the involvement of the local population through various types of initiatives aimed at spreading awareness and a sense of responsibility towards the fate of the farm. Among the first initiatives, we planted an orchard through the campaign *Adopt a tree* and launched a day of collective harvest of ancient grains on about three hectares of land (*Seminiamo Resistenza*). A pivotal push in this direction was given by the launch of *Mo.T.A.* (An acronym for *Mondeggi Self-Managed Terrain*), a project created to stimulate access to the land and to involve more actively the inhabitants of the area. The idea was to give stewardship of about 150 olive groves and 35 olive trees for those who ask for it. Currently, at least 300 people have joined the project and retaken back from abandonment a substantial portion of the estate around a farmhouse that has become a place of aggregation. The organization and co-ordination of olives pruning, gathering and squeezing work, the finding and use of shared tools, water supply, cleaning and maintenance tools are self-managed by members of the project. Periodically, training sessions are organized by experts, collective working days, social occasions and self-financing initiatives to purchase the tools and maintain the area. The various forms of participation, collaboration and

mutualism, frequentations, shared lunches, foster mutual knowledge and make people see themselves as important part of a community they can themselves rely on.

Thought these methods, a diffused community emerged and consolidated, a community that shares a conception of land as a precious asset, source of food and human relations, not as a mere surface to exploit in the name of producing consumer goods to maximize profit. This vision is firstly expressed in the fields, with the reintroduction of peasant agriculture for the benefit of the environment and of society as a whole, and secondly among people. In this sense, the community of Mondeggi is currently a meaningful experiment in democracy from the bottom based on participation in open and inclusive assemblies and overcoming, adopting the method of consent, the principle of delegation and the majority that imposes its will to the minority. The assembly organization is articulated on different levels in coordination between them, ranging from the Plenary Assembly to the Agricultural Assembly and Mo.T.A project.

### **The Farm without Masters**

Today, about twenty young people, with diverse skills and experiences, live in two buildings inside the estate, contributing to the recovery, maintenance, and agricultural production of the *Farm without Masters*. Work is carried out by the community with various levels of participation and involvement and is the result of training courses and sharing with sustainable agriculture experts. Peasant agriculture is understood as a re-examination of the local traditional agro-ecological model, respecting the natural cycles and the dignity of animals and people. As a model this uses a minimum level of mechanization and maximizes multi-functionality and the importance of biodiversity in agro-ecosystems. Multi-functionality is pursued searching for synergies between the various agricultural activities: cultivating arable land, fruit trees, vegetables, aromatic plants and saffron, olives and vineyards, goat breeding and laying hens, beekeeping, nursery, herbal productions, baking and brewing.

The olive grove (about 10000 plants), completely abandoned and partially invaded by ivy and bramble when we took popular stewardship is now almost fully recovered, thanks to a progressive and enormous pruning and cleaning work carried out by hundreds of people in the area during many days of collective work. This was a radical change from the old management, which was heavily mechanized. This meant, for example, that the olives present on the farm showed a single-form breeding system, suitable for harvesting by mechanical shakers. Today, most of these olives have been reformed to a polycrystalline form, to facilitate manual harvesting of fruit, at most facilitated by low-impact electrical buffers. A good half of the vineyard, about 8 hectares, has been cured and converted to biological methods.

Cultivation of the arable crops takes place in three-year cycles, rotating cereal seeds, legumes and fodder, fertilizing with pastures, in an area of about 15 hectares that is increasing each year. Several ancient varieties of wheat and an evolutionary population composed of a rich genetic diversity that gradually adapts to soil, cultivation techniques and the ever-changing climate are sown, mixed and reproduced. Wheat and barley are used for baking and natural brewing. The two apiaries producing honey, derived from the characteristic plant species of the Tuscan hills, include about 50 families of ligustica bee, bred without the use of artificial nutrition and adopting organic acids for the containment of varroasis. Sheep breeding is carried out in the respect of the animals, the feeding of which depends on the pastures of the unplanted fields, the fields of arable land and the olive grove, with the integration of locally produced forage (hay, moss and pruning). The flock, made up of about twenty sheep and a few guard dogs, contributes to soil fertilization and weed control. Animal health is ensured by healthy eating, extensive sheltering and grazing facilities and by using homeopathic veterinary techniques. The two acres of orchard, with about 400 fruit trees of local varieties adopted by the population, continue their development after having overcome two difficult

years, due to the drought and continuous incursions of the ungulates. Cultivation, reinforced by the fence and equipped with an irrigation system, thus proceeds towards a generous fruiting.

The land set-up revolves around line of plants more distant than usual to leave room for promiscuous crops and green manure. Given the scarcity of water and the absence of wells, the orchard and the gardens are irrigated by collected rainwater and constructed wetlands. The optimization of water consumption allows the production of vegetables throughout the year with a natural and synergistic approach. Biodiversity is also increased thanks to a House of Seeds, created thanks to seeds exchange events organized with the Network of the Rural Seeds and the nursery activity that takes place in two greenhouses adjacent to the gardens. Thanks to a meticulous manual work, some 500 square meters of land houses some thousands of saffron bulbs producing a first-class spice. Together with herbal medicine, a project for the self-management of health has been created which explores and practices alternatives to the present system that responds to the interests of pharmaceutical companies. On top of all this, Mondeggi is also dedicated to education and training. Numerous school classes are regularly visiting the farm to participate in environmental laboratories and educational activities on a variety of issues including critical consumption, sustainable agriculture and the preservation of commons. Similarly, Mondeggi's *Peasant School* is a popular space of free exchange of knowledge and skills where professors, agronomists, experts and peasants hold lectures and laboratories on agriculture and self-production.

All of these activities are self-managed by mutually supportive groups that coordinate in the Agricultural Assembly. Part of production is absorbed by self-consumption and committee initiatives. Everything that is consumed but not produced inside the estate is found or exchanged with producers that adhere to the principles of the project, ensuring a high level of sustainability for the farm and all the events that are held there. The direct distribution of produces, supported by the project, is driven by relations of trust and organized with local producers and co-producers, in the *Self-Managed Spaccio*, the initiatives of the local node of Genuino Clandestino, and the Self-managed Farmer Markets Network in the territory of Florence. Over time, a network of solidarity and collaboration has spread around Italy, but also in other countries through visits and initiatives with subjects and communities struggling to regain decision-making powers regarding land access and production and distribution of food in order to cut them off from the hands of large distributors, subjects of finance and the global market. These collaborations also involved several Italian and foreign universities and research centers (Florence, Empoli, Siena, Rome, Trento, Cagliari, Turin, Oxford, Barcelona) with which we developed documents, papers, theses, trainings, and debates on agroecological knowledge and techniques as well as on issues of current significance.

## **What now?**

Despite the development of the project and the undeniable number of people who take part in its activities, despite the positive social impact in the area, institutions still refuse serious confrontation with this diverse inclusive community, continuing in the logic of alienation to the best bidder. This choice was initially justified by the huge debt (about € 1.5 million) accumulated in decades of agroindustrial management and abandonment, a result of myopic and faulty choices of agronomic policy with production models that alienated property, skills, and techniques of peasants and craftsmen: an approach that paved the way for an industrial model that has proven again and again to be the first cause of pollution, land abandonment, the disappearance of almost two million small agricultural realities over the last thirty years, the strengthening of gentrification and centralization of property land. After launching auctions and deliberating the sale of some land to cover the creditors expenses and interests, the Metropolitan City of Florence sold all of the company's movable property and proceeded to buy its debt with public money in order to be able to put together agricultural land and some buildings—controlled by the company—and the historical villa—under public control—and attempt to sell them all together in an auction. In response to this, in

order to strengthen Mondeggi's housing and management project, inspired by the positive experiences of Naples (former *Asilo Filangieri*) and Palermo (*Montevergini Complex*), which saw public institutions recognizing self-management, we drafted a "Declaration of civic management of a common", with which the community of Mondeggi is self-constituted and recognized, the only reality - at present - able to guard the farm through a series of clear shared rules.